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ABSTRACT

Pieces of three narratives, related through dramatic readings, recount the experiences of three women who teach and write in the field of rhetoric and composition. One directs a freshman writing program, one is a full-time composition instructor, and one is an assistant professor of rhetoric and composition. Each is employed within the English department of a mid-sized state university. Each of the women was asked why she chose to teach writing and how connected she felt with other women in the field. The three women expressed belief in the importance of their work, but varied over their connections to other women in the writing profession. The three discussed whether they felt that their labor was valued, and whether they felt optimism for their future careers. They also talked about the special problems and rewards for women within rhetoric and composition and whether working in the field should be a goal for women. Each found real benefits and opportunities in rhetoric and composition. (SG)

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"Speaking with and through women: New narratives about teaching and writing," a dramatic reading

by Alice Calderonello and Deepika Karle

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"Speaking with and through women: New narratives about teaching and writing," a dramatic reading by Alice Calderonello and Deepika Karle.

Alice: In her 1989 4C's address Andrea Lunsford invited us to "stretch ourselves around new stories, around new narratives of what it means to be a teacher of writing and a writer in the twenty-first century." Here, then, are pieces of three narratives--moments within the on-going stories of three women who teach and write within our profession: One, whom we shall call Eve, directs a freshman writing program; Nita, is a full time composition instructor on a renewable-up-to-a-limit-of-five-years contract, and Nancy is an assistant professor of rhetoric and composition. All three are employed within the English Department of a midsized state university. Each of these women responded to a set of questions that asked them to talk about their experiences, both joyful and painful, within our profession.

The first question I posed invited Eve, Nita, and Nancy to talk about why they chose--and still choose--to teach writing and to be a part of the profession of rhetoric and composition. Not suprisingly, all of them felt that teaching writing as well as being immersed in work related to writing and writers was something important that they did well. All gained immense satisfaction from their labor. Eve, however, felt that her administrative duties kept her out of the classroom and away from her own writing more than they should.

Deepika: I wish I were teaching more composition. My job is so

CS213292

demanding that it just doesn't leave enough time for this. I feel I ought to be teaching at least one writing course each semester. Of course, I'm doing some teaching when I train incoming writing instructors, but it's not the kind I should be doing. And my writing. I write everyday, but it's all job related; it's all professional. I have folders full of poetry that I haven't even had time to look through.

Alice: When asked the next question, the extent to which she felt connected with or supported by other women in the profession, each woman gave a very different answer. Some talked about different moments in their careers; others needed to qualify their answers by describing their own temperements. In the end, though, everyone provided a definitive response to the question: either a "yes, I feel connected with other women" or a "No, I don't feel connected." By far the most optimistic response came from Nancy, who said she felt extremely connected, extremely well supported.

Deepika: When I was looking for an assistant professorship I really wanted a job where I'd have a senior colleague in rhetoric--preferably a full professor, someone tenured. I had in mind that it would be really good if this colleague were also a woman--of course (laughing) this restricted the field considerably. Seriously, though, I learned the value of female colleagues when I was in graduate school; my women friends were very important to me at that time and have continued to be vital as I've begun to establish myself within the profession. We still correspond with one another and room together at conferences. I've also been fortunate to have been supported by senior women within

the profession. One in particular offered me encouragement at a crucial time in my career--when I presented my first conference paper--and she has always been friendly and affirmative since that time.

Alice: In contrast to Nancy, neither Eve nor Nita felt much connection with or support from their women colleagues. Nita characterized herself as something of a loner, which she thought might account (in part) for her isolation. Even so, she wished she felt more integrated into the English Department and claimed she felt like a "second class" citizen. Eve spoke in more emphatic terms:

Deepika: As Director of the Writing Program, I don't have a peer; nobody does what I do; I feel alienated in that respect. Also, I believe that most of the women professors in the Department don't know much about either my job or the writing program. Last week--to give you an example--the secretary wasn't around and a woman faculty person asked me if I could do her xeroxing for her because "she was very busy." Well, you know, that tells me a lot about people's perceptions of what I do around here.

Alice: Following the question that asked them to assess their connection with and support from their women colleagues, I asked Eve, Nancy and Nita to describe the extent to which they felt their labor was valued. In order to answer this question, Eve needed to separate the Department in which she worked from the rest of the university and from the profession at large.

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Deepika: Within the English Department, some people understand the amount of hours this job takes--the nights, the weekends--but there are others who think my work is worthless. I've even heard that when graduate students praise the writing program for its quality and helpfulness, some faculty respond by saying "I find that very hard to believe." But when I go outside the department, whether it's within the university or somewhere else, I am treated with respect because our writing program is respected. And certainly at professional meetings I feel as if I'm a professional among professionals.

Alice: Like Eve, Nita also needed to consider different communities when asked to assess the extent to which her labor was valued.

Deepika: I believe my work is valued within the profession because of the research that has been and is being done about teaching composition. There seems to be an intense interest in learning how writing can be taught more effectively. Unfortunately, though, within the University I don't think my work is valued. Students aren't expected to write in other classes; in fact, they may not write much at all until their senior year and by that time their skills have gotten weaker. Then their professors wonder "didn't they teach these students anything?" That really makes me angry. It's not our fault. The English Department is, perhaps, a bit better, but I feel those of us on the writing staff who aren't tenured or tenure-track faculty get messages that suggest we're not very important; sometimes these are subtle, sometimes they're pretty explicit, like memos that refer to "faculty and other teachers" or "faculty and teachers." I find this personally insulting.

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Alice: When Nancy was asked about the extent to which her labor was valued, she needed to make a distinction between her work within the profession and her work as a professional. She felt that her work within the profession was not teaching--unless it was the instruction of graduate students to help socialize them into the profession; teaching was labor she performed as a professional within the confines of the university.

Deepika: So far, I can't say yet that I've seen any way in which my work within the profession is valued, aside from a kind of recognition that I'm a person who knows something about a particular area--my specialization. But even that kind of recognition hasn't been huge. On the other hand, if I think of my work as a professional , particularly my teaching, I know many of my students really value that because they tell me they do.

Alice: In responding to my next question, about the optimism (or pessimism) with which she viewed her future career, Nancy retained her distinction between her work within the profession and her work as a professional . As a professional, Nancy felt she possessed a set a skills, a body of knowledge, and a wealth of experience that would enable her to define herself in various ways and that this adaptability would equip her to carry on a successful career in a variety of contexts. She seemed to be less assured about her future within the profession, however.

Deepika: I doubt that I'll ever get invited to give a keynote address

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somewhere or win the Braddock award. Not that I wouldn't be delighted if I did, but if these kinds of things don't happen, that's ok. Still, I would like to publish something that really finds an audience, something that isn't just one of the many things people read and forget or that is acknowledged by a tiny group of readers who then move on. I guess what I'm saying is that I really would like some kind of external validation from the profession, not just my university or my students.

Alice: When asked about their optimism or pessimism about their own futures as professionals, Nita and Eve, in contrast to Nancy, focused principally upon the conditions at their home instition. Eve said that she wanted to stay in the profession, wanted to stay in adiministration because of the enormously positive feedback she got from students and teachers within the writing program. She related the fact that some undergraduate students had actually taken the time to write letters to her about how much they liked the recently instituted portfolio system. And this had touched her deeply. But these frequent and tangible affirmations to her worth were accompanied by constant worry about current and future budget cuts and how these would affect the program:

Deepika: The money crunch affects everything I do. Last summer I spent hours and hours studying how to improve placement procedures into our various writing courses. I wrote to programs all over the country to find out what they were doing, surveyed the professional literature, and started to design a new procedure. Of course, there's no money, so that project is on hold. And just about everyday, part-time faculty

come in and ask me if they'll have jobs next year. I can't tell them anything for sure; and this is so demoralizing. I may have to make severe cuts in the program; I've figured out how to do this, but I know what it will do to the quality of the instruction we offer. I wake up in the night. I have outbreaks of exema; I'm always scratching my hands and thinking and thinking about all of this.

Alice: That her university had instituted the possibility of ongoing instructorships in writing gave Nita a glimmer of hope about her future within the profession. But if these didn't materialize, she honestly didn't know what she'd do. Then, too, some recent events within the English Department had been demoralizing--to say the least:

Deepika: Near the end of last year, we had a meeting to talk about how we might cut the fat out of the Department in light of the budget cuts. You know, eliminate some course offerings, make classes a bit larger--that sort of thing. During this discussion, someone suggested that since the Acting Director of the Writing Program would be leaving and since the Department was advertising for a new Asstistant Director, well, this was an opportunity to eliminate both of these positions and save all sorts of money. Amazingly, there was actually some support for this proposal because 'things seemed to be running pretty well by themselves.' Now I and most everyone else involved in the program knew that the Acting Director was working nights and weekends, but no one seemed interested in this type of informatiion. Those of us who teach writing were sitting in a cluster together, which is pretty typical, and none of the people talking about this proposal even turned around to look at us. I know that we were

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looking at each other in shock and amazement. Fortunately, some members of the Department did speak in opposition to the suggestion and that made me and the rest of us feel better. The proposal was dropped.

Alice: When asked to think about the special problems and/or rewards for women within rhetoric and composition, all three felt that compared to many other other professions there were some real benefits and opportunities. Nita thought that the professionalization of rhetoric/writing had helped to legitimize and make more important the work of writing teachers, the majority of which she assumed were women; she also felt this process would provide momentum for the establishment of more continuing positions for writing teachers at colleges and unversities, which would, in turn, give women more employment opportunities and choices. In addition, she thought that professional conferences and seminars brought women into contact with one another and gave them an opportunity to exchange ideas and reaffirm the importance of their work. Eve also expressed cautious optimism about the benefits of our profession for women, suggesting that rhetoric and composition seemed to attract people who tended to be less competitive and more supportive of one another. But she also suggested that there were problems for women, nonetheless.

Deepika: Women are the pack horses of an English Department. Part of the reason is that teaching composition, which is seen by some as 'drudge work' is often associated with women. But I have to say that I think women are socialized to do heavy work without complaining and I think women want to do everything well, which makes us real busy all

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the time. Last week a woman colleague brought by a fortune (from a fortune cookie) that she knew I just had to see. It read, "Your great attention to detail is both a blessing and a curse." We had a laugh over that one, but this sort of illustrates what I'm talking about...

[redacted]: In thinking about the advantages and disadvantages for women in our profession, Nancy commented upon the special kinship she felt with other women within the field and wondered whether the support and care she experienced weren't available especially for--or perhaps only to--women. She thought this kinship was a real benefit, but, nevertheless, felt that the profession still favored men.

Deepika: When I observe our profession, I see more men at the upper levels and more women at the lower levels, and I believe it's harder for women to get phd's, to get assistant professorships, to get tenured, or to get promoted. This whole process starts with many women being weeded out because they never discover that there <u>is</u> a profession called rhetoric and composition or they don't imagine that they could be a part of it. Even if a woman <u>does</u> chose to enter a graduate program, her professional aspirations and interests may not be perceived as being as intellectually sophisticated or as important to the discipline as those of men. I think also that having a baby is always a big deal, a <u>big</u> problem that doesn't fit into exisiting models and roles. A man doesn't have to consider the baby question; it is a non issue for him--even if his wife has a child. A woman <u>must</u> ask herself the question: what happens if I choose baby or tenure? If I choose one, does that mean not choosing the other? If I take a chance and try to have both will I get both? Or will I end up with a baby and

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no job.

Alice: As a final question on each interview, I asked all three women whether they thought being a member of our profession should be a goal for women. No one raised any strenuous objections to this idea. Eve said "sure why not." And Nancy thought that a real advantage was that there was quite a bit of latitude regarding the ways in which women could position themselves within rhetoric and composition--although she wondered whether graduate students weren't now being encouraged to be more interested in "rhetoric" than in "composition." Still, her summative response was that our profession was a pretty good place to be. Nita ended her interview with a comment that expressed her wishes for the future.

Deepika: My hope is that those of us who take teaching and writing seriously will eventually change people's attitudes about the teaching of writing so that all of the barriers that separate us and all of the factors that devalue our work will some day become history.

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